Presentation to Church Music Institute
"A Matter of Taste?"
January 21, 2011

The subject of this discussion is, "A Matter of Taste?"—with a question mark. The question mark is important. The question that looms over us is whether a discussion of music in worship is properly discussed as a matter of taste. Frankly, I'm glad for this addition of punctuation to our title, because there is indeed a necessary question here. Just what is taste? Our caterer here at Preston Hollow knows about taste. People have widely varied opinions about what is good and what is not. Some like their green beans crisp, while others think they are undercooked. Some like vegetables, while others don't. Anyone in the food business knows that "you can't please all the people all the time."

Some of us decorate our homes in contemporary style, while others consider it cold and uninviting, preferring antiques. Neither style is "wrong," it's rather a matter of taste.

So we come to music. What troubles me about our term, "taste," is that it so easily smacks of elitism. Discussions like this end up, inappropriately to my mind, contrasting "bad taste" and "good taste" in music, as if some forms of music are beneath our social or educational level. As Presbyterians, we are already plagued with this form of elitism. Studies show that Presbyterians are highly educated, with income levels far above many other religious groups. We value education, and we have been responsible for the founding of many of our best institutions of higher education—even if many of them no longer claim a church relationship. We give lip service to "inclusiveness," and yet a cursory look at our demographics reveals a less than stellar record in attracting members other than white, middle class folks. This is a matter for other conversations than this; but I believe it's necessary background for the discussion at hand. Bottom line: I'm uncomfortable with "taste" as the litmus test for what makes for appropriate music for worship.

We should begin by affirming that it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine worship without music. Music has been an integral part of the worship of human beings throughout recorded history. In the Hebrew scriptures, not only did the people sing and play instruments, but the very creation of the cosmos is pictured with stars that sang for joy in the new morning of the universe. We are constantly adjured to "sing to the Lord a new song," for we know instinctively that the songs and music of faith are capable of taking us places where mere words cannot go.

This is not to say that music in worship has been uncontroversial. The songs of the lay prophets, Eldad and Medad, were questioned by the professionals, since they did not hold the proper degrees or ecclesiastical status. David's wife, Michal, objected to his singing for joy after recapturing the Ark of the Covenant, not so much because of the style of the song than that he apparently insisted on singing stark naked.

In the years following the Reformation, music was held suspect by Zwingli and others—to some extent by Calvin as well—because of the possibility that music might merely manipulate the emotions, while disconnected from the proclaimed Word of God.

Luther turned out to be the champion of Reformation music. He writes:

"…when man's natural musical ability is whetted and polished to the extent that it becomes an art, then do we note with great surprise the great and perfect wisdom of God in music, which is, after all, His product and His gift; we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace. A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs."

Luther also connected the music of worship with the creation itself—his was an interesting theory about why music reaches down deep inside the human spirit. He suggested that perhaps good music contains distant echoes of creation—when, in the words of Job, "the morning stars sang together for joy." Perhaps he was right—that music transports us to another time and place, to the profound joy God took in creating the heavens and the earth, in those first, pristine days when God commanded light out of the darkness, when the waters were separated by the firmaments, and the stars were spun into their places. Its lilting harmonies take us back to where it all began—when, in the morning of everything, even the stars sang for joy in their creator.

So I would reframe the question implied by the punctuation of our theme. Rather than taste being the litmus test of music for worship, the more appropriate question is, what forms of music are most true to the nature and intent of the worship of the people of God? If we are never more alive as human beings than in those moments when we turn to God in worship, we are reminded that the point of being human, according to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, is "to glorify God and enjoy God forever." Is there any better way to express that essential purpose of our humanity than to break into song? Through music, the glory and enjoyment of God is raised to new heights. Music takes us beyond the merely rational and explainable into the praise and glory of God.

Perhaps the Reformers were right, in part, to be concerned about where music takes us. If true worship is really not about us, but about the God who is worshipped, does our music lead us to praise, or does it inspire, merely in the same way that we are inspired by a good song on the radio? I am, admittedly, very broad in my musical taste. What I listen to on the

radio is not all Bach and Beethoven. I love jazz, I really like a lot of pop songs, and Phil Collins' rendition of "There's Something In the Air Tonight" can transport my emotions and speak to me in some deep places in my psyche. Yet somehow I doubt that I will ever choose that song for worship, because the places it speaks to in me have little to do with the pure praise of God. Frankly, it may speak more to my own teenage romantic memories.

In this fine book, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religion*, Frank Burch Brown skids on the edge of elitism by calling such music "kitsch":

Kitsch is by no means unappealing. Indeed, that seems to be part of the problem. It is art that appeals to many people, but for reasons that others find objectionable. And while various sophisticated people enjoy kitsch in some fashion even while recognizing it as kitsch, most people who think kitsch is good do not think of it as kitsch at all. To them it is ideal art: usually well crafted and generally heartwarming, filled with memories and dreams. It is art that is felt to be touching—sometimes as though, itself, "touched by an angel." A "kitschy" way of being touched can also cause the sorrows of life suddenly to well up and to dissolve into tears. Such sweet or sentimental effects, very different from the blinding and converting tears tasted by Derrida, may be disdained by the academic and certifiably serious art world. But they abound in the art that is beloved by bourgeois taste and by the masses of people who may not know or notice the difference between genuine art and its limitations.

When I first read that passage, my reaction was that Brown was taking the "low road," and expressing the very elitism we have described above. But then he turns self-critical. He writes:

…to make general pronouncements about bourgeois taste and the tastes of the unsophisticated masses is quickly to dehumanize a very human subject. It is to risk stereotyping issues and people in a manner that is unwise and uncharitable—and basically unchristian.

I found more light in his quote from the novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984):

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

In other words, kitsch creates in us an "observer self." We are moved, and then we watch ourselves being moved. By extension, we might say that this is a form of art that might well lead us to leave worship talking about how "moved" we were, and how we were inspired. The question remains,

whether God was indeed inspired as well. It seems to me that further exploration of this "observer self" as it occurs in worship would be fruitful. Many popular forms of worship today may prove to be excessively self-conscious, with worshipers constantly measuring their own level of inspiration, rather than losing ourselves in the praise of God.

Let me quote Brown once more:

…kitsch is a beautiful lie; it prettifies and falsifies the world, often by embracing, implicitly, a cause or an ideology that requires cheap emotion and an unqualified (but blinkered) acceptance of reality, a categorical "agreement with being."

We must add here that the author Brown quotes from *An Unbearable Lightness of Being* had been deeply effected by the emotionally manipulative music of the Communist regime in Czechoslavakia. His version of kitsch, then, is basically dishonest, dangerous, and—again—manipulative. It's not too far a stretch to imagine that some forms of music today may be used in ways that are emotionally or even politically manipulative and even dishonest.

It is unfortunate that the popular view of what has been called the "worship wars" has been couched in terms of "traditional" versus "contemporary" music. I believe that these are the wrong categories on which to base a helpful conversation about music in worship. I may have shared with some of you the story of the time I was privileged to work with the prolific church composer Hal Hopson, who was our director of music when I first came to Preston Hollow. One day I suggested to Hal, "wouldn't it be nice to have a choral Prayer for Illumination, to be sung just before the reading of scripture?" The next week, Hal placed on my desk an arrangement of one of the Prayers for Illumination from the Book of Common Worship, an a cappella arrangement set to a beautiful Russian melody, in seven parts! I asked Hal, "When did you do this?" He said, "While standing in line at the bank." Goodness!

The week after the prayer was first sung in worship, someone suggested to me that "what we need is more contemporary music in our worship." I said, "Hal wrote that piece last Wednesday. Is that contemporary enough for you?"

The problem with the traditional versus contemporary argument is that it begs the issue, as if all good contemporary music is bad or good for worship—or, for that matter, whether all classical music is appropriate as well. That argument also leaves out large pieces of the conversation. What about the music of other cultures? What about the music of other Christian traditions? Is it fair to be open to African and other music from the growing Southern Hemisphere, while considering the culture of our young people off-limits and always an example of kitsch?

Even the inclusion of various cultural traditions is not always easy. For a time, theologian James Cone objected to white congregations singing African American spirituals—although he later recanted his opinion. Many

Black Americans consider it inappropriate for white congregations to sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the so-called Black National Anthem, since whites have not had the same experience of racism and slavery. We have not "earned the right" to sing that hymn, the argument goes.

I'd like to revisit the issue of honesty in music. We are right to eschew music in worship that is emotionally manipulative, such as the music of the Czechoslovakian Communists. Many years ago, when I was serving my first parish in Pennsylvania, a young man greeted me at the door after worship. He said, "My name is Jim. I'm a former Pentecostal minister, I think I'm losing my faith, and I'm a basket case." The story he recounted to me that afternoon was telling. It seems that he had been serving as pastor of a hard-core Pentecostal group, meeting as a house church. Jim was an accomplished rock musician, and pretty much "rocked the house" in his worship services. One day, while leading worship, he stopped mid-song, and thought to himself, "What are we doing?" He commented to me that, in that moment, he realized that he was very good at manipulating his people emotionally and, in his words, "making them think that all that emotion was the Holy Spirit." His ministry was, he said, at its heart, dishonest. He left the ministry for a time, later went to a Presbyterian Seminary, and became a pastor in the Reformed tradition. But it was always important to him that he never lose the "fire in the belly" he valued from his old tradition.

So here is my thesis: the question mark in our theme should be applied not to "taste," but to honesty. We are called, in our music ministry, to be honest with our theological tradition, honest with the scriptures, honest with the spiritual needs of our congregations, and, most importantly, honest with God.

If we apply the test of honesty to our music ministry, there are a few implications. Let me elaborate briefly, in hopes that we can find some signposts to help us wend our way through this important question.

First, I would suggest that we must be honest with our theological tradition. Understand that I use the term, tradition, not *traditionalism*. Someone has said that "tradition is the living faith of dead people, while traditionalism is the dead faith of living people." Our tradition is our understanding of our relationship with God, as shaped by those who have gone before us. We do not worship in a chronological vacuum, as if we are called to invent worship from scratch. If we do that, we succumb to the tyranny of the present. We come to believe that the music of the past is always outdated and irrelevant to the life-experience of today. On the contrary, it may be that in this technological age, the age of reality TV and relative values, never have we needed more desperately the grounding gifts of the past. Those who have gone before us have, at times, paid with their lives and fortunes to pass on a living tradition of faith; so we sing, "Faith of our Fathers, Living Still." Grounded in a knowledge of the past, we can sing, "Our God Our Help in Ages Past / Our Hope for Years to Come." Just as the Psalmist, in a fit of spiritual depression, found comfort in

remembering “how I went up to the House of the Lord,” so that past can be a rich source of instruction and inspiration in the present.

Being honest with our tradition keeps us from viewing the compositions of other times as the music of “dead white men.” Rather, one of the mysteries of music is that it has the capacity to let believers of other times and places, often long ago, come alive again in our own experience. We can actually feel what they felt, and be invited to enter into their devotional lives. We ignore the Christian witness of our grandfathers and grandmothers in the faith, only to our peril.

Second, we can be honest with the scriptures. Music, when put to the words of scripture, has the capacity to illuminate the Word. This came home to me in a new way when I attended a silent retreat at Christ in the Desert Monastery in Abique, New Mexico. The community of Benedictine monks at Christ in the Desert, following the rule of Benedict, sing every one of the 150 Psalms *every week of their lives*. Benedict believed that by singing the Psalms regularly and repeatedly, they will break through our defenses and become part of us. I came to respect deeply that community’s love affair with scripture. They leave out nothing. They sing the imprecatory Psalms, the “ugly” Psalms, right along with the beautiful Psalms of praise.

Our music must be honest with our understanding of the Triune God. The larger corpus of our musical portfolio should show a balance, reflecting the work of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. To praise Jesus at the expense of God the Creator or God the Spirit, for instance, does not reflect the fullness of the God we find in scripture.

Third, we must be honest with the spiritual needs of our people. Studies show that the number one felt need of people is to experience a “connection with God”—to experience God’s presence. Some of our people are doing just fine, thank you. But more of us are dealing with the real-life challenges of real people. After sixteen years of pastoral ministry in this church, I can look out over the congregation from the vantage-point of the pulpit, and I see people who are struggling with depression, wondering how other people can appear to be so “together.” I see people struggling with addiction. I see people being pulled apart by family dysfunction, and broken relationships. I see folks who are valiantly trying to live past abusive relationships. I see people going through the pain of medical treatments. I see people who are dying. I see people who “have it all,” but wonder why their lives still feel empty. I see people who have prayed their hearts out, and wonder why God doesn’t fix their lives.

Music, as we have said, must be honest. Empty triumphalism, the “happy-clappy everything’s just hunky-dory with Jesus” diet of music only reinforces for many people the belief that if only they were “better Christians” they wouldn’t feel the pain anymore. Again, take the Psalms as a model. The Psalmist sang not only happy songs, but angry songs and sad songs and wistful songs, reflecting the whole, incredible range of human experience. Feel anything, and you can find a scriptural song to sing.

Unfortunately, there are many churches where you'll never hear a sad song, no matter how many Sundays you attend.

A friend of mine recently told me that one of his old seminary professors once said that, in planning worship, your people need a good cry at least once a month. That may or may not be true, but I can tell you that we have lots of people who are crying more than that anyway. And our music needs to be honest with their sorrows, as well as their joys.

Martin Luther also gave us a gift when he said that our music must reflect the two Great Commandments of Jesus: Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. Our music must love God. The best of church music, and the best of worship as a whole, has always been directed toward God. That's why, in weddings, we sing songs directed toward God, rather than romantic love songs directed at the couple on the Chancel. I've explained to couples more than once that "just because a song says, 'God, I love you,' doesn't mean it's fit for worship!

And our music should love our neighbor. It should be honest with their experience of life, their yearning for God, their joys as well as their sorrows. It should drive us deeper when we live too much on the surface of life. It should point us, and our neighbors, toward the God whose grace and love cover a multitude of sins.

However, we must remember that the "neighbor" we are to love includes more than just those who participate in worship. Rather, our worship should point us toward the call to love the neighbor defined by Jesus in his Parable of the Good Samaritan as anyone in need. Music for worship needs to advance the agenda of the gospel to do justice and to love kindness. A diet of music that only reinforces the personal needs of worshipers, but that does not advance the cause of social justice, is incomplete at best. The hymns, "Once To Every Man and Nation" and Harry Emerson Fosdick's "God of Grace and God of Glory" are examples of hymns that point us beyond ourselves into the social implications of the gospel. The music of worship should regularly challenge us to love our neighbors, fulfilling the social dimension of Jesus' commandments to love.

Finally, we need to be honest with God. Worship, to put it simply but, I think accurately, is prayer. In worship, we lift our eyes and our spirits toward God. In worship, we experience, at our best and highest moments, the *ecstatic*. We experience *ec-stasis*. We literally stand outside ourselves, we get beyond ourselves and come into contact with the glory and mystery of God. We join together with the stars of creation, and even babes and infants like us sing to the glory of God, and our prayers rise like incense toward the divine Source of all things. In music, we can express our joy, our thanks, our pain, and our yearnings—then, occasionally leave them all behind to adore Almighty God.

If our music is honest with God, then it will also be *aspirational*. It will call us above ourselves, and even our question of taste. We will not sing from the lowest common denominator of culture or personal preference. Rather, it will call out the best of us—not only of who we are,

but what we could be by God's grace. It will challenge us to move, and to grow, in our praise and worship of God.
Then we can join together in singing:
All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
Him serve with fear, His praise forth tell;
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

Of course, that's the "Old Hundredth," passed down from the 16th Century, and yet it is as contemporary as anything written today. The original text, from the Geneva Psalter is:
You faithful servants of the Lord,
sing out his praise with one accord,
while serving him with all your might
and keeping vigil through the night.

Unto his house lift up your hand
and to the Lord your praises send.
May God who made the earth and sky
bestow his blessings from on high.

A matter of taste? I don't think so. Taste is trivial, and subject to doubtful tests. I think it's a matter of honesty—honesty toward our given tradition, scripture as the Word of God, the spiritual needs of our people, and finally, honest to God.

And so we sing:
When in our music God is glorified,
and adoration leaves no room for pride,
it is as though the whole creation cried
Alleluia!

How often, making music, we have found
a new dimension in the world of sound,
as worship moved us to a more profound
Alleluia!

So has the Church, in liturgy and song,
in faith and love, through centuries of wrong,
borne witness to the truth in every tongue,
Alleluia!

And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night
when utmost evil strove against the Light?
Then let us sing, for whom he won the fight,
Alleluia!

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!

And may God give us faith to sing always
Alleluia! Amen.